Teaching Change

How publishing students can develop expertise to cope with digital challenges

Frania Hall

Frania Hall is Senior Lecturer at the London College of Communication, University of the Arts London, and leader for the book specialism on the MA in Publishing. She has worked across a variety of publishing sectors, including academic publishing at Routledge, schools at Hodder Education, business at Pearson with the FT imprint and, most recently, legal and professional at Informa and at Sweet & Maxwell. Hall has experience of managing most aspects of a publishing operation: predominantly editorial and commercial management but also marketing, production, and subs and ads management. Having been involved in M&A activity and integration, Hall has an interest in managing and training for change as well as conducting research in the area of collaboration and partnership.

f.hall@lcc.arts.ac.uk

This paper explores the ways to equip students of publishing with the skills necessary to enter an industry facing unprecedented change. Digital strategies and business models are evolving rapidly within the book industry. Publishers need to recruit for the digital environment and can find it difficult to identify employees with the sort of skills they need. A short study was undertaken to explore the importance of teaching publishers in training about the skills required to design effective digital strategies in an environment that is always changing. Developing a simulation approach in this case allowed students to experience decision making, problem solving, and creative thinking, enabling them to be ready to adapt as the industry moves forward, and preparing them to be the publishers of the future.

Keywords: publishing, book industry, change, digital, simulation, teaching, strategy, skills

Introduction

Digital publishing has thrown the industry into a state of flux. While digital strategies and business models are evolving rapidly, there is no indication as yet that

these models have become fixed. Indeed, the nature of publishing in the digital environment and the constant innovation in publishing technologies suggest that strategies will have to change and adapt continuously. Publishers find they need to recruit more and more for the digital environment; it is not always easy to identify employees with the sort of skills they need.

Many publishing commentators state that fundamental changes need to take place within the industry in order to face the digital future. Nash (2010), for instance, considers the nature of managing data for discoverability, while Esposito (2011) explores the changing nature of global publishing; Healy (2011), meanwhile, looks at the way the reader is changing and what companies will need to look like in the new digital world. From legacy structures to social media marketing, most aspects of the publishing value chain are under review, and many employees old and new need to be ready to adapt quickly and think creatively about the best way forward.

This article outlines the results of a short study that was set up to explore the importance of teaching publishing students, and publishers in training, about the skills required to develop digital strategies in an environment that is always in flux. Teaching students about current digital strategies is not necessarily of great help when these move on so quickly. So the skills that are of more use to employers are the ability to understand the process of developing a strategy and then recognizing how to adapt it, being quick to analyse information and take action.

With the focus on a piece of action research that applied aspects of education theory to explore ways to teach students how to work effectively in a changing environment, a teaching scenario was developed. This article outlines how the scenario was structured and used within a teaching context, drawing conclusions about the key issues around teaching an understanding of coping with change.

The skills to face change

Talking regularly to a variety of senior managers within publishing, they all say similar things: the industry is always looking out for new employees who can engage with the digital environment. They recognize that no one has all the answers, nor do they expect everyone to

be digital specialists, but students coming into the industry from publishing courses need to be technically literate and able to respond to change quickly and confidently. The challenge is to develop a way to teach students these abilities and make sure they are prepared for the professional world they will enter.

This influenced me to set up a situation that not only taught these skills but also helped students get as close as possible to experiencing using them in real life. I designed two workshops, one building on the other, that set up a scenario whereby students were members of an independent publishing house devising a digital strategy: the first workshop looked at what they would do to start a digital list; the second followed through as if it were a year on, to test how the students might change their strategy in light of the level of success of their first year. In addition, further market and environmental changes were thrown into the mix of the scenario to ensure they had to be agile in adapting their strategy in light of these new issues.

The workshops were run at the end of the main teaching terms for the students. It was their opportunity to role play being part of the industry and talk more in-depth about what they had learnt over the year. I followed both with feedback sessions to get an idea of how the students felt about them. I introduced a reflective element to the feedback as well to delve further into what they felt they had experienced and learnt.

The student context

While the practical focus of the workshops was on developing a digital strategy, they were also intended to help students develop their own learning strategies. All the students involved were MA students getting close to the end of their course, so in a position to apply a good range of knowledge from their studies. Students will have a variety of learning styles and may come from highly structured undergraduate courses, so they are not always used to applying their own reflection to their learning, as a way of learning in itself, and do not necessarily think critically in such a way as to maximize their learning experience. The issue of experience became more central to the workshops since part of the aim was for the students to get as close as possible to what decision-making over digital publishing strategies might really be like.

For much of the year, a publishing course will focus on an explanation of well-established processes and business practices; a lot of information is condensed into a small amount of time. This may well happen before students have undertaken much work experience. Students often worry that while they know a lot of theory about publishing when in an interview situation, they do not feel confident about applying it. Their worry is they cannot perform effectively when asked to discuss a topic in an interview or work situation, so the simulation had another role: to give students the opportunity to rehearse digital discussions and debates in order to build their confidence in applying their knowledge.

Business models

Digital publishing is a hot topic and students soon realize that being comfortable with the issues involved is important for getting a job. Of course, all publishing is digital in that all production systems have involved digital workflows for some time; back office system as well as web-based promotion activity and customer communications have also been in place for some time (Thompson, 2005), but in this case the term 'digital publishing' can refer to the area of building business models for digital products. While in some sectors there are fully fledged digital models (e.g. journals, professional reference), in others the digital models are still at an embryonic stage. And in all cases the environment is changing constantly; technology is always on the move and new entrants change the climate in a moment. This is unlike traditional publishing environments of the past, where business models were long established and so could be taught as a reasonably 'fixed' topic.

Yet understanding models that are soon to change is not what the industry is looking for. The question managers want their employees to answer is not 'what is digital strategy?' so much as 'how do we go about devising a strategy in a fast-changing world?' Taking what the industry needs as the learning objective and aligning it to the curriculum we teach and the way we teach it is one way to create a seamless link between a course and the industry.

On this basis, the students need a learning situation where they can practise applying their knowledge and develop a subset of skills which will be most useful to the

industry—decision making, problem-solving, thinking flexibly, and being agile to adapt to change. Extended role play becomes a key teaching activity which can create an experience for the students about what it is like to work in a publishing house where team performance and collective decision making are critical.

Extended role play becomes a key teaching activity

Educational theory

When looking at how to teach ways to cope with change effectively, it is useful to consider education theory. It can help when developing a robust teaching scenario, providing an effective framework to teach skills that are transferrable from course to work. The workshops were developed as part of an action research project. One of the fundamental principles of action research is that it provides the opportunity to 'look, think, act' (Stringer, 2007) so that from my observing a problem (how to teach change effectively), one can analyse it in relation to literature and so develop a mode for action. As a system designed to adapt to a work environment, it has the appropriate cross-over for an applied, industry-focused course of this sort.

With this in mind, I explored the literature around the topics of learning and experience. One distinction that emerged was between the learning of a topic (strategy, financial management for digital products) and the underlying learning that needs to go on (skills such as decision making, problem solving, analytical skills, and creative thinking) in order to perform effectively in industry. Another critical issue was to analyse the link between learning and 'real life', in terms of learning for the workplace. In order for the learner to realize the benefits for their future learning beyond their course, an element of self-awareness about the learning was also key.

Role play

Explorations of the effectiveness of group work and simulations have a long history stemming from analy-

sis of the nature of play and work (Dewey, 2000), where play encourages imaginative leaps that opens up new learning. Group work builds a variety of skills that are easily transferrable to real life; it allows students to learn how to work in teams, make decisions, and come to conclusions (Jaques, 2000). It is clearly a sound approach to use when encouraging publishing students to learn behaviours they will need to apply in their workplace, as role plays are 'working representations of reality' (Jaques 2000, page 132). This is something I wanted to build upon, as the presence of a scenario is a critical way to mimic the world of publishing (yet acknowledging it will necessarily be condensed in form).

Scenarios allow students to test ideas and apply their knowledge using their imagination, and hopefully make new connections. Creative thinking in itself is a skill that can be used in the workplace. There was also an element whereby role play allows for a certain transition to independence after the intensive learning of the course: 'group experience can be extremely important in achieving freedom from dependency' (Jaques, 2000, p. 83). The emphasis on experience to build confidence is implied here.

Experiencing, as far as possible, how publishing actually works is an important part of building learning that lasts. Educational theory here builds around the concept of 'connect learning and doing' (Mentowski, 2000, p. 229). Learning that lasts is not just about giving students the knowledge to use in their daily lives, but a framework around which they can continue to learn effectively in their professional lives. Experiential learning therefore was an important part of the development of the workshops.

One other area was also important for ensuring the workshops were as useful as possible for the students. Simulations like this can help develop deeper learning. This can occur in various ways, but ensuring students have to be as active as possible as they learn means that their learning will become more embedded. Problem-based learning is an example of an active method requiring a student to get involved through speculation and the development solutions (Biggs, 1999); this forces them to become more analytical and engaged even if they are less naturally academic. So having to solve digital problems was a good way to ensure students were involved. Reflective learning too was fundamental to

this; helping to ensure learning would last as students would recognize the sorts of skills that underpinned this (i.e. the tacit skills of problem solving rather than the explicit skills of strategy formulation). The reflective learner 'generate(s) apparently new and meaningful ideas, not related to specific, existing knowledge' (Moon, 2004, p. 85) so reflection is a skill that is of central importance when exploring ways to develop new strategies in the face of change.

The structure of the action research methodology was also developed in order to test and evaluate the effectiveness of the workshops to meet the challenge of teaching change; the details of the educational research findings will not be covered in this article, but the focus instead will be on how the workshops themselves functioned. In the research, specific processes were tested out. Rather than discuss these in detail I have included the aspects that, after the trial, were seen to have succeeded.
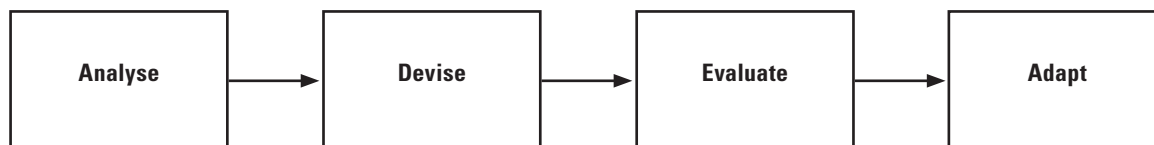
Workshops

While one detailed workshop would certainly teach students about decision-making, one of the critical issues (I felt) was the need to be able to adapt to a changing environment; it was clear that the second workshop, in which the parameters were changed and unexpected elements were thrown in, would be critical to testing their ability to adapt strategy. So the overall workshops took the following form: the first set the scene of a fictional independent publishing house and allowed students to discuss a strategy; the second changed the business environment in order to challenge the students further and adapt the strategy they laid out in the first.

A structure for the two workshops also emerged, taking themes that delved deeper into the skills that needed to be exhibited. So the framework, as illustrated by Figure 1, showed a stage-by-stage approach to the strategy development required: using data to analyse, devising the strategy (both workshop one), evaluating the success of the strategy, and adapting it in light of the changing environment (covered by workshop two).

The scenario required a lot of preparation. I started creating the learning objectives for the simulation, which provided a check for everything else that followed. I focused on the skills needed to develop a strat-

Figure 1. **Learning stages for the Workshops**

```
┌─────────────┐      ┌─────────────┐      ┌─────────────┐      ┌─────────────┐
│   Analyse   │ ───▶ │   Devise    │ ───▶ │  Evaluate   │ ───▶ │    Adapt    │
└─────────────┘      └─────────────┘      └─────────────┘      └─────────────┘
```

egy, such as decision-making and problem solving, as well as risk analysis and the ability to reach consensus. These objectives were summarized as follows:

· To make decisions as a group and take informed risks where information may be limited or subject to change.
· To develop a tangible strategy that is as workable as possible in an uncertain climate.
To develop skills to react effectively to a changing business environment.
· To think quickly and make adjustments to business strategies as new issues or information arises.

I assigned specific roles to students (e.g. marketing, editorial), replicating traditional functions in a publishing house and to ensure more structure to the group work and that certain areas that needed consideration were not forgotten. Students did comment on this as effective, as it forced them to take a particular angle (and for those taking roles such as legal and finance it was a particular challenge).

The scenario
The scenario was reasonably detailed. I developed a fictional independent publishing house that mirrored, to some extent, the sort of range and size of publishers like Quercus , Canongate, and Profile. I wanted the students to have to analyse the situation carefully. They needed both to be conversant with the facts and figures about how the house was structured now and have information that might be necessary to decide a strategy. They also needed to be able to sift through information, so I gave them some which might or might not be relevant to the specifics of their strategic choice. Therefore the scenario took a while to build, as it included:

· Sales patterns in terms of types of books
· Annual sales
· Typical life cycles

· HB/PB splits, frontlist/backlist splits both by types of books
· Average annual revenues for different categories of titles
· Average sales by sales channels and discounts for those channels
· Some market and competitor analysis
· Some analysis of the production capabilities of the house
· A menu of production costs for new digital product development (I researched pricing for anything from developing ebooks and enhanced ebooks, to developing apps and building websites).

There was also some more general information about the identity of the house, the quality of marketing, etc. The house was clearly successful but tightly run. There was some limited digital output, in that books were available as ebooks, but the questions asked were centred around what was the aim of the strategy and how would they develop it. One key part was the description of the wider market environment (e.g. agency/wholesale issues, Amazon's latest strategy, approaches from Google, etc.).

Each session was two hours divided up with a brainstorming element that was facilitated, and then from those ideas a strategy was developed. Students focused the debate around three areas (product, price, and place) and applying the 'analysis to adaption' model mentioned earlier worked well. The students felt this helped them get to grips with the issues systematically, and one stated this meant they learnt 'to turn ideas around a problem into principles of a strategy'.

After the first session, I took the strategy they had developed, created a budget out of it, and then structured some figures to present to them once they met again the following week, showing them how well their strategy had performed over a year. I then added more

parts of the scenario by throwing in challenges within the market environment that had occurred during the year (these were fictional, such as new ventures by Amazon, price trends in light of the agency pricing debate, etc.). The students then had to follow the same procedure and see how far they would adapt their strategy in light of the year one outcome. At the end of each session, there was a period of debriefing so students could reflect on what they felt they had learned.

Successful aspects of the simulation

Overall, the students found the sessions worked very well and provided a challenging environment in which to test their abilities. Various practical issues were assessed (e.g. timing, structure, number of participants, levels of participation) but the key points that ensured the workshops were successful for the students were:

1 *Detail of brief.* This needed to be detailed to get them analysing a lot of information. Obviously this was artificial in some respects, and I realized I would need to go through the brief quite carefully to get the students up and running; it reinforced how important my role as a facilitator was in keeping them moving forward so that they did not get too micro-level in their thinking. So, while the brief had to be detailed, they had to be quick at looking for key pieces of information. One student was careful to point out that the information was used effectively, so they had 'well informed discussions'.

2 *Facilitation.* It was clear the facilitator was critical in allowing students to learn from each other, ensuring no-one dominated the proceedings, and so provide the space for students to take responsibility for their learning. While a facilitator has to be careful not to lead the discussion, it allows students to develop ideas without getting waylaid, moving them along to ensure they tackled the range of topics. Students felt ownership of the strategies developed, yet I was able to help them step back now and then to consider particular issues, such as the level of risk they were taking, and ensure there was consensus.

3 *Reflection debriefing.* This was built on the learning pedagogy in that it helps students understand what they have learnt from the scenario and how it has come about. This was so that they would recognize the underlying skills they were learning from the process of the scenario (decision making, problem solving). Some students surprised themselves as to how much they found they could contribute. They also realized how much they had learnt in the previous months, as it was crystalized in these sessions. Indeed, by the second workshop, some were engaging with the reflection process even further: as one noted, it is 'interesting to see how I learn but also how other people get into the learning processes. It is how we work together, whether it is in a classroom setting or later on in life'. This reinforced the thinking of Mentowski (2000) on learning that lasts, adding into the mix that observing other people's learning styles is also fruitful for one's own development.

4 *Preparation.* One area that remained unresolved was whether any preparation, particularly in relation to the role play, would have been valuable (and more realistic). However, the immediacy of the workshops would have been lost, given one of the aims was to get students thinking on their feet. One student felt this was particularly important as it meant '[you have to] force yourself to think'. From my observations, I was impressed by the level of analysis the students were able to apply from reading the scenario in a short space of time.

> **To teach change you need to create a situation of change.**

Challenges of teaching change

Reflecting back on what emerged from the sessions, some particular issues that are embedded in the nature of facing change effectively were brought to the fore:

1 To teach change you need to create a situation of change. So the two-stage approach was important in really testing the students' staying power and

ownership over their strategies as well as their understanding about how to adapt them. The students were unanimous in agreeing this was particularly effective. One student noted it was 'definitely helpful to see the process develop'. To me, the confidence the students exhibited the second time round was impressive, as they got to apply skills again and seemed to have matured.

2   One aspect that emerged was the necessity to talk through the market changes in the second workshop. This was to allow students to consider their response, as the publishing house, to each point of change. In this they were developing an ability to process new information and spot implications, even if the direct impact may not be large. For the workshops, this certainly added value on many levels—including building student confidence in considering a variety of real-life factors and debating the pros and cons behind them.

3   Implementation was not specifically discussed in the brief, but inevitably some sort of planning for the implementation of the strategy became embedded in the creation of the strategy itself, showing the students how intertwined creation and implementation are.

4   Working to a consensus was an important part of the workshops. Coping with change can lead to a lot of different ideas from lots of individuals, but the workshops showed the students that to develop a strategy effectively some sort of consensus is necessary. Being listened to and stating their own points of view came out very high in the students' analysis of their experience: 'I like this brainstorming, comparing ideas and maybe I see strategies I never think about', one student commented, while another said she liked the way they 'connected with each other and modified each other's ideas'.

5   A lot about coping with change is about confidence. For the students, their confidence using their subject knowledge in a holistic way was paramount: 'Funny how once you start how much you know', one student said, commenting on confidence, while an-

other noted, 'we're thinking conceptually about risk from what we've learnt on this course'. The results of the workshops were to build confidence in the students so that they can develop reasoned strategies and cope with a variety of ever-changing issues within the commercial environment.

6   Understanding risk was one of the central points to come out of the workshops. Clearly when managing digital change in a challenging environment, understanding the nature of risk is important. The students felt much more up against the issue of risks within the simulations. They needed to understand how to assess risk effectively and then understand how far they would take a risk in relation to their house and their business environment. Interestingly, in the first workshop the students all started off proposing bold and dramatic digital product strategies but as the discussion moved on they stepped back from these ideas and decided to take it very slowly and carefully, ultimately proposing extremely safe strategies. In the second workshop, when they had gained confidence, they were able to take a more creative, but still measured, approach combining some experimental elements with more predictable strategic outcomes to devise a strategy that was much more interesting and well thought out.

7   The part of the exercise that was lacking was inevitably the financial side. While the students had lots of figures and while I ran their strategy through a financial spreadsheet to give them more figures for the second workshops, there was simply not enough time to get embedded in the financial calculations for the strategies, which would of course be central in a real-life scenario. They did carry out 'back of envelope' calculations to get a sense of costs but sources of funding for strategic projects were not discussed in detail and, longer term, some way of addressing this aspect of strategy development within the scenarios will be important.

Conclusion

Articles in publishing journals such as those by the commentators mentioned above— Nash (2010), Healy (2011), and Esposito (2011)—consistently state that the

publishing industry is going to have to change quite considerably to take on the digital challenge. They look at various aspects of the industry and recognize that such issues as coping with legacy infrastructure or beating off the challenges on copyright are setting up significant problems. Companies need to do more than establish short-term measures to stem potential loss of revenues if they are to compete alongside the large technology corporations who are commandeering the publishing space.

More radical reorientation of the industry may well be necessary. There is much to suggest publishing houses can do this. And the new employees in the industry will need to engage in this process: understanding how to respond quickly and effectively will be key. Seeing how to devise strategies, assess risk, and plan and implement strategies confidently and expertly are key skills that these people will need.

So are the students we teach ready to move into publishing, equipped for change? Workshops and simulations are ways to help students get a flavour of the strategic choices they may need to take when they move into and then further up in the industry. It gives them the space to test out ideas and explore issues of risk and experimentation. The aim of developing techniques such as these to teach change is to provide students at least with a starting point, and a means by which to tackle issues around publishing change. They then will have a sense of the skills they need to apply as well as an ability to understand the way they can learn, and continue to learn, in the workplace, where the predictions are only for more continuous upheaval for many years to come.   ∎

Bibliography

Biggs, J., 1999. 'What the Student Does: Teaching for enhanced learning', *Higher Education Research and Development*, 18 (1), pp. 57–75.

Dewey, J., 2011. *Democracy and Education: An introduction to the philosophy of education* (Simon & Brown)

Eposito, J., 2011. 'One World Publishing, Brought to you by the Internet', *Publishing Research Quarterly,* 27, pp. 13–18

Healy M., 2011. 'Seeking Permanence in a Time of Turbulence', *Logos* Vol. 22, Issue 2

Jaques, D., 2000. *Learning in Groups*, 3rd edn. (London: Kogan Page)

McNiff, J. & Whitehead, J., 2009. *Doing and Writing Action Research* (London: Sage Publications Ltd.)

Mentowski, M. & Associates, 2000. *Learning that Lasts* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass)

Moon, J., 2004. *A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning: Theory and practice* (Oxon: Routledge).

Nash, R., 2010. 'Publishing 2020', *Publishing Research Quarterly*, 26, pp. 114–118

Stringer, E., 2007. *Action Research*, 3rd edn. (London: Sage Publications Ltd.).

Thompson, J., 2010. *Merchants of Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press)